

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 PM-07 NSC-10 SPC-03 SS-20 RSC-01

CIAE-00 DODE-00 INR-10 NSAE-00 PA-04 USIA-15 PRS-01

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FM AMEMBASS SAIGON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9027

INFO AMCONSUL BIEN HOA

AMCONSUL CAN THO

AMCONSUL DANANG

AMCONSUL NHA TRANG

USDEL JEC PARIS

CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 19489/1

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT PINR VS

SUBJECT: AN QUANG BUDDHISTS VMOVE UNCERTAINLY TOWARD DECEMBER BI-ANNUAL CONGRESS; ACTING RECTOR THIEN MINH "RESIGNS"

REF: A) SAIGON #6407; B) SAIGON A-132, JULY 19, 1973; C) SAIGON A-147

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JULY 31, 1973; D) FVS 32,95;0 OCTOBER 29, 1973

1. SUMMARY: THE BI-ANNUAL CONGRESS OF THE AN QUANG FACTION OF THE UNITED BUDDHIST ASSOCIATION, NOW SCHEDULED FOR DECEMBER 10, WILL SEE A SHARP CONTEST FOR THE POSITION OF HIGH SECULVUR COUNCIL (HSC) RECTOR. PRE-ELECTION JOCKEYING--AND SOME ELBOWING--IS WELL UNDERWAY. THE CURRENT ACTING RECTOR, THIENV MINH, A "MODERATE", BADLY WANTS THE POSITION, BUT HIS CANDIDACY IS SERVIOUSLY HAMPERED BY THE PERSONAL EVNMITY OF TRI QUANG, BY HIS OWN LESS THAN ASCETIC REPUTATION, AND BY THE STRONG OPPOSITION OF RADICAL SOUTHERNERS WHO ARGUE THAT SINCE THE RECENTLY ELECTED SUPREME PATRIARCH IS A CENTRAL VIETNAMESE, THEY SHOULD CHOOSE THE HSC RECTOR. HAVING SUFFERED A DISVAPPOINTMENT
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IN A RECENT MAVJOR LOBBYING EFFORT IN NHA TRAGV AND UNDER HEAVY FIRE

FROM HIS OPPONENTS, THIEN MINH HAS SUBMITTED HIS "RESIGNATION." HE COULD RE-ENTER THE RACE, OR MORE LIKELY EMERGE WITH SOME SUCH FACE-SAVING POSITION AS "SUPREME ADVISOR." THE ATTITUDE OF TRI QUANG MAY BE DECISIVE. THERE IS A POSSIBILITY THAT IF DEADLOCKED, THE BI-ANNUAL CONGRESS MIGHT TURN TO TRI QUANG HIMSELF. A SOMEWHAT MORE LIKELY POSSIBILITY IS THE ELECTION OF A WORTHY, PLIABLE SOUTHERNER, THIEN HOA. "MODERATES" FEAR THAT EITHER WAY, THEIR INFLUENCE IN AN QUANG MAY DECREASE, ALTHOUGH UNITY BEHIND ANY LEADER OR CONSENSUS IN SUPPORT OF ANY POLICY APPEARS UNLIKELY. AIRGRAM FOLLOWS: END SUMMARY.

2. THE NATIONAL CONGRESS. THE FIFTH BI-ANNUAL NATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE AN QUANG FACTION OF THE UNITED BUDDHIST ASSOCIATION (UBA) WILL BE HELD IN SAIGON DECEMBER 10-12, 1973. THE PRINCIPAL ORDER OF BUSINESS WILL BE THE ELECTION OF A NEW 15-MEMBER HIGH SECULAR COUNCIL (VIEN HOA DAO) (HSC). THIS THE MOST IMPORTANT POLICY-MAKING BODY IN THE UBA, AND THE HSC RECTOR AND ITS GENERAL SECRETARY ARE TRADITIONALLY CHIEF UBA SPOKESMEN ON POLITICAL MATTERS. UBA "CHARTER" REVISIONS ARE ALSO ON THE AGENDA. REPORTEDLY, THESE ARE DESIGNED PRIMARILY TO INCREASE HSC CONTROL OVER SATELLITE BUDDHIST EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL WELFARE ORGANIZATIONS.

3. THE RECTORSHIP IS BEING CONTESTED BETWEEN "MODERATES" AND "RADICALS," WITH OTHER FACTIONAL RIVALRIES ALSO AFFECTING THE RACE. (THESE TERMS ARE OVERSIMPLIFICATIONS, BUT USEFUL IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT TO DISTINGUISH THOSE CURRENTLY ADVOCATING A MORE MILITANT ANTI-GVN LINE FROM THOSE WHO BELIEVE THE BUDDHIST CHURCH MUST MAINTAIN A CAUTIOUS, LOW-PROFILE POLICY.) THE UBA IS SERIOUSLY DIVIDED, WITH AT LEAST THREE PRINCIPAL FACTIONS AT ODDS WITH EACH OTHER: A) A SOUTHERN COMPONENT, WHOSE LEADERS (PHAP LAN, PHAP TRI) TEND TO BE RADICAL OPPONENTS OF THE GVN AND SUPPORTERS (FOR WANT OF A BETTER ALTERNATIVE) OF GENERAL DUONG VAN (BIG) MINH; B) A "MODERATE" CENTRAL VIETNAMESE FACTION LED BY ACTING RECTOR THIEN MINH WHO HAS BEEN ACTIVELY SEEKING THE RECTORSHIP; C) ANOTHER CENTRAL VIETNAMESE GROUP DIRECTED BY TRI QUANG, WHO IS A BITTER PERSONAL ENEMY OF THIEN MINH. WE BELIEVE BOTH CENTRAL VIETNAMESE FACTIONS SUPPORT POLICIES WHICH HAVE KEPT AN QUANG LARGELY OUT OF VIEW AND OUT OF TROUBLE SINCE THE CEASEFIRE, BUT THIEN MINH AS ACTING RECTOR HAS BEEN THEIR SPOKESMAN AND MOVST
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VISIBLE ADVOCATE.

4. USUALLY, THE CENTRISTS WIELD PREDOMINANT POWER WITHIN THE AN QUANG UBA. HOWEVER, THE ELECTION OF A CENTRAL VIETNAMESE SUPREME PATRIARCH LAST JULY LENDS WEIGHT TO THE SOUTHERN CONTENTION THAT THE HSC RECTOR SHOULD BE A SOUTHERNER, OR AT LEAST A FIGURE SATISFACTORY TO THE SOUTHERNERS (REF A). FURTHERMORE, THE THIEN MINH-TRI QUANG SPLIT AND THE POOR PERSONAL REPUTATION OF THIEN

MINH ARE SERIOUS HANDICAPS FOR THIEN MINH'S CANDIDACY.

5. THIEN MINH BADLY WANTS THE RECTORSHIP, BUT PRESSURE HAS BEEN GROWING AGAINST HIM AND EVEN HIS ASSOCIATES ARE ARGUING THAT HE HAS NO REAL CHANCE TO WIN AND THUS SHOULD STEP ASIDE, AIMING TO RETAIN SOME INFLUENCE THROUGH SOME SUCH POSITION AS "SUMPREME ADVISOR." THIEN MINH VIGOROUSLY LOBBIED FOR HIS CANDIDACY DURING A MID-OCTOBER CONVOCATION OF MR-1 AND MR-2 BONZES IN NHA TRANG, BUT SUCCEEDED IN GAINING AT MOST SUPPORT FROM ABOUT HALF THE CENTRAL VIETNAMESE LEADERSHIP (REF D). WE ESTIMATE THAT AT THIS POINT THIEN MINH CAN COUNT ON NO MORE THAN 11 VOTES FROM CENTRAL VIETNAM AND ANOTHER 8-10 FROM SAGON AND MR-3. THERE WILL BE 68 BALLOTS CAST.

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6. ANTI-THIEN MINH CAMPAIGN. THIEN MINH'S ENEMIES HAVE ALSO MOUNTED A CAMPAIGN AGAINST HIM IN THE SAIGON PRESS (ALLEGING MISAPPROPRIATION OF A SWEDISH RED CROSS DONATION, MISMANAGEMENT OF THE QUANG DUC YOUTH CENTER, ETC.) IN LATE OCTOBER SOUTHERN RADICAL BONZE PHAP LAN STAGE-MANAGED A GATHERING AT THE VAN DUC PAGODA IN THU DUC, WHICH TURNED INTO A HUMILIATING SEMI-PUBLIC DENUNCIATION OF THIEN MINH. (THIEN MINH'S SUPPORTERS

TERM THE VAN DUC PAGODA ENCOUNTER AN "AMBUSH".) AS A RESULT OF THESE SETBACKS, THIEN MINH AND HIS STALWART SUPPORTER HSC SECRETARY GENERAL HUYEN QUANG HAVE SUBMITTED THEIR "RESIGNATIONS". THEY WILL CONTINUE TO SERVE AS ACTING RECTOR AND SEC GEN UNTIL THE DECEMBER CONGRESS, HOWEVER.

7. THE OUTCOME OF THE CONTEST OVER THE RECTORSHIP REMAINS UNPREDICTABLE. IF THIEN MINH SHOULD SEE AN OPPORTUNITY TO REGAIN SUPPORT, HE COULD "RE-ENTER" THE RACE. THE ATTITUDE OF THIEN MINH'S ANTAGONIST TRI QUANG MAY WELL BE DECISIVE. THERE ARE FEW INDICATIONS WHAT TRI QUANG WILL DECIDE. ON NOVEMBER 14 VENERABLE GIAC DUC, A MODERATE SUPPORTER OF THIEN MINH WHO ALSO CLAIMS READY ACCESS TO TRI QUANG, TOLD EMBOFFS HE BELIEVES HE HAS CONFIDENTIAL

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PERSUADED TRI QUANG TO SUPPORT THIEN MINH FOR THE POSITION OF "SUPREME ADVISOR TO THE HSC". GIAC DUC SAYS HE ARGUED WITH TRI QUANG THAT TO ELIMINATE THIEN MINH COMPLETELY WOULD LEAVE THE HSC OPEN TO THE INFLUENCE OF IRRESPONSIBLE RADICALS AND TO POSSIBLE MANIPULATION BY THE COMMUNISTS.

8. A TRI QUANG SOLUTION? GIAC DUC ALSO PREDICATED THAT IF THE CONGRESS REACHED AN IMPASSE, IT MAY TURN TO TRI QUANG AS RECTOR. TRI QUANG SAYS HE DOES NOT WANT THE POSITION. THIS MAY BE TRUE, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND HE MIGHT ACCEPT IT TO "SAVE" BUDDHISM, AND ON ASSURANCES THAT HE WOULD HAVE EXTENSIVE FREEDOM OF ACTION. IF THIS HAPPENS--THERE IS ALREADY SOME PRESS SPECULATION THAT IT MIGHT--GIAC DUC PREDICTS THERE WOULD ALSO BE A RE-ORIENTATION OF AN QUANG TOWARD A SOMEWHAT MORE MILITANT ANTI-GVN POSTURE. WE TEND TO BELIEVE, HOWEVER, THAT TRI QUANG WOULD NOT YIELD TO THE MOST EXTREMIST ADVOCACY OF A RENEWED "STRUGGLE" CONFRONTATION WITH THE GVN UNLESS HE PERCEIVED THE PRESENT ADMINISTRATION IN A GREATLY MORE WEAKENED STATE THAN IS CURRENTLY THE CASE.

9. THE MOST LIKELY WINNER IN THE RECTORSHIP RACE IS PROBABLY THE VENERABLE THIEN HOA (NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE PREVIOUS RECTOR THIEN HOA WHO DIED FEBRUARY 13, 1973). THE LIVING THIEN HOA IS REGARDED AS A WORTHY, PLIABLE SOUTHERNER, INEXPERIENCED IN POLITICS. MODERATES LIKE GIAC DUC FEAR HE WOULD BE SUSCEPTIBLE TO THE INFLUENCE OF RADICALS LIKE FELLOW-SHOUTHERNER PHAP LAN, BUT A THIEN HOA AS RECTOR MAY BE THE BEST THE MODERATES CAN HOPE FOR AT THIS STAGE. IN ANY CASE, "MODERATE" INFLUENCE IN AN QUANG CIRCLES MAY DECREASE AS A RESULT OF THE MID-DECEMBER ELECTIONS.

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